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SUBJECT: DIWANIYAH PROVINCE: PUSHING FURTHER ON
DE-BA,ATHIFICATION

REF: BAGHDAD 0310

Classified By: PRT Diwaniyah TL Michael Klecheski for Reason 1.4 (b) and (d)

This is a PRT Diwaniyah cable.

11. (C) SUMMARY: Diwaniyah Province officials continue to press their de-Ba,athification campaign, and some of them view their province as a trailblazer in the effort. Governor Salim Alwan led a February 9 demonstration to protest against allowing former Ba,athists to run in the upcoming elections. Then, on February 11, the PC passed legislation prohibiting former Ba,athists from holding management positions in the provincial government. The PC also is planning to push ahead with measures to take land leases away from former Ba,athists and auction the land off to the public. We have been meeting with PC members and others to underscore the U.S. position of non-interference in the Iraqi election process and support for de-Ba,athification conducted in accordance with Iraqi law. Most have accepted our arguments, although a Provincial Council (PC) member with the Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq (ISCI), who is among the leaders of the de-Ba,athification effort, told PRToffs that former Ba,athists were seeking to manipulate the U.S. for their purposes and that if the U.S. ended up helping such people return to power, she would turn from viewing us as &friends8 to seeing us as &invaders.8 We have heard a range of views on the impact of de-Ba,athification on the elections, with a PC member with the Fadhila party telling us the effort resonates with the public while locals in a small town tell us that it is a cynical move that only distracts from key issues such as unemployment. END SUMMARY

ANOTHER ANTI-BA,ATH DEMONSTRATION

12. (C) The de-Ba,athification campaign, which had been gaining steam (reftel) in predominantly Shi,a Diwaniyah Province, gained further momentum over the last week. On February 9, the provincial media reported that some six hundred demonstrators, led by Governor Salim (Da,wa), Provincial Council (PC) Chairman Jubair Salman Awfi (State of Law, independent) and many other PC members marched to the Governate Center in protest of the national Cassation Court,s February 3 decision to delay processing of de-Ba,athification appeals until after the upcoming national election. (The demonstration took place despite the fact that this decision was withdrawn on February 7.) PC Health Committee Chair Thamir Naji Shkale (elected on the State of Law ticket but identifying himself as independent), who took part in the demonstration, estimated to us that as many as 2,000 people participated. The media also reported that staff of government offices took part. Indeed, a PRT staffer who had gone to the offices of the Director General of Agriculture to conduct training on that day found that many DG staffers were away, reportedly at the demonstration; those who remained behind suggested to our employee that their management had encouraged the staff to take part in the march.

ANTI-BA,ATHISTS MEASURES

13. (C) The PC had announced in late January that all former

Ba,athists must return weapons they had received during the Saddam era, although they had left unclear how that policy would be implemented. A local PRT employee reported that, based on his conversations with at least a dozen locals of varying political stripes, there was support for the general idea of taking away Ba,athist weapons but much uncertainty about how this could be done unless the Ba,athists complied voluntarily. PC member Zainab Khamza Abaid (Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq - ISCI) told us she strongly supported that measure but downplayed its practical significance. She commented that everyone was allowed a pistol and Kalashnikov in their homes, just no heavy weapons. Governor Salim had told us previously that it would affect only seven former Ba,athists in Diwaniyah, and had been vague on its implementation. Other PC members with whom we have spoken have been equally vague about implementation.

¶4. (C) Meanwhile, the PC continued its de-Ba,athification drive on February 11, when it passed legislation dismissing all former Ba,ath members from leadership positions in the provincial administration. PC member Abaid initially told us that this and other de-Ba,athification measures applied only to formerly active, higher-ranking members of that party, but later suggested that it applied to rank-and-file members as well. She said that office directors and others in leadership posts could retain their salaries but would lose their positions, although they could work in lower-level positions. She said that officials could not appeal the decision to remove or demote them. A local PRT employee suggested the public is skeptical that all former Ba,athists would be fired or downgraded, since many hold important posts suggesting strong political connections. The deputy editor of the Governor's newspaper, for instance, is a former Ba,athist, and his removal is far from certain given that he

is well connected politically, the PRT employee speculated.
PLANS TO TAKE LAND AWAY FROM BA,ATHISTS

¶5. (C) PC member Abaid told us the PC is also preparing measures to implement legislation the PC passed in late January that would terminate the land leases of former Ba,athists. She estimated that in Diwaniyah Province, a few hundred Ba,athists had gotten such leases in the Saddam era; they had retained those leases, which are renewed annually, while renting out the lands to others at a significant profit. The new move, which would be carried out under the supervision of the Director General of Agriculture and the PC Committees on Accountability and Justice, would terminate the leases as they come up for renewal over the course of the coming year, with the land to be auctioned off to the public.

Asked if former Ba,athists could appeal that decision, Abaid responded that most were no longer even residing in the province and were not likely to return from abroad. Diwaniyah is a small province in which everyone knows who was a Ba,athist, she continued, making challenges even more unlikely. In any case, she concluded, the PC did not anticipate a mechanism for filing appeals.

¶6. (C) Abaid suggested that the land issue was of prime importance in this heavily agricultural province, and that Ba,athist leases were a sore point with the public. She noted) with evident pride) that Diwaniyah was leading the way in taking land away from Ba,athists in this way, and predicted that most other provinces (except maybe those in the north) would follow suit.

PERCEPTIONS OF THE U.S. ROLE

¶7. (C) The conversations with these and other interlocutors came as part of PRT Diwaniyah's continued engagement with leading politicians about U.S. views on the elections and de-Ba,athification. We highlighted that the U.S. is not interfering in Iraqi electoral processes, sees the importance of ensuring Iraqi citizens protection of due process during de-Ba,athification, and supports de-Ba,athification conducted in accordance with Iraqi law. Most of our interlocutors have told us they understand and accept our arguments, and have said they view the U.S. as playing a generally positive role in supporting free and fair elections in Iraq.

¶8. (C) PRT staffs have heard some expressions of skepticism, however. PC Committee on Coordination and Relations Chairman

Ayad Tulai (Fadhila) told us he recognized that the U.S. was not actively seeking to interfere, much less to help restore the Ba'athists to power. While he understood the argument that the USG was not interfering, however, Tulai said that the fact that the USG was actively promoting strong views on the elections gave the impression that the U.S. was still trying to make decisions for Iraq. Iraqis had to take tough decisions on their own, Tulai continued, and the U.S. should steer clear of the entire issue. ISCI PC member Abaid, who noted that the Saddam regime had killed nine of her close relatives, spoke with particular passion on the issue. She accepted our argument about U.S. non-interference and said that she viewed the U.S. as a friend.⁸ She expressed concern, however, that former Ba'athists were manipulating the U.S. to serve their goals, adding that if we ended up helping bring Ba'athists back to power or even on to the ballot, she would view the U.S. as invaders.⁸

VIEWS ON DE-BA'ATHIFICATION

19. (C) ISCI PC member Abaid expressed impassioned support for the de-Ba'athification campaign, saying that unless former Ba'athists were excluded from running for office, the upcoming elections would be widely viewed as false.⁸ Several of our interlocutors have taken issue with this position. Independent PC member Shkale, while acknowledging that he marched in the February 9 demonstration, told us the de-Ba'athification campaign was ill-timed, appearing to be a political move; de-Ba'athification should have been accomplished several years ago, but it should now wait until after the elections. Fadhila member Tulai said he disagreed with his own party on the issue and commented that de-Ba'athification should not be carried out right before the elections. Tulai added, however, that the campaign would resonate with many people in the province and would therefore hurt the prospects of former PM Allawi's party in Diwaniyah.

At least one conversation that a PRToff held in the small town of Saniyah called into question the de-Ba'athification campaign's resonance with the public: several university students told PRToff they were tired of the issue. (Enough of the de-Ba'athification debate, we want to feed our families.)⁸ The students expressed frustration that the candidates had no economic platforms and said they saw little point in voting. 10. (C) Views on de-Ba'athification also are tempered by the sentiment, which we hear with some regularity from a range of contacts, that for all its brutality, the Saddam regime provided the public with essential services more effectively than the current government is doing. A leading tribal figure in Mahniwiyah, for instance, expressed this view to us. Diwaniyah's Director General of Education told us that many teachers felt

that the educational system had worked better under the Saddam regime. He has instructed his entire staff not to discuss de-Ba'athification in order to stay out of trouble.

11. (C) On the other hand, the recent bombings in Najaf and Karbala, in which a number of Diwaniyah citizens were killed or injured, have reinforced anti-Ba'athist passions. The Governor and other officials have publicly blamed the Ba'athists and, as our U.S. military partners find in their engagements with locals in the province, there is a widespread belief that Ba'athists did indeed engineer these attacks. The provincial media has been full of reports about the attacks and the victims who hailed from Diwaniyah.

COMMENT

12. (C) The de-Ba'athification effort is gaining steam rapidly in Diwaniyah. For some, like PC member Abaid who lost nine of her relatives to the Saddam regime, the motives are no doubt sincere. For others, it is likely driven primarily by political motives. Judging by our conversations with elites and others, it is far from clear whether the effort will have the political effect desired by those who are driving it. Some locals apparently see all former Ba'athists as culpable for the crimes of the Saddam regime, while others blame only higher-ups or active members. This could create tensions, particularly given that the PC's latest measures appear to be vague about which of those groups they apply to and how the measures will be implemented. The lack of an appeals mechanism is of

particular concern in that regard. Further complicating the issue is that, while most of the public in Diwaniyah remains bitter toward the Saddam regime, even some of those who are embittered believe that the regime provided services to the public more effectively than does the current government.

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